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Enhancing Private Higher Education in Malaysia: An Interview with the Former Deputy Director General of the Department of Private Education, Ministry of Education, Ms. Arpah Mohamad

By Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan Abdullah and Munir Shuib

Private higher education institutions (PHEIs) have been active in the Malaysian higher education landscape since early 1980s. Since then, private colleges and universities have flourished to complement the efforts of their public counterpart in meeting the nation's higher education and manpower needs. To understand the development of private higher education (PHE) in the country, an interview was held with the former Deputy Director General of the Department of Private Education (DPE), Ministry of Education Malaysia, Ms. Arpah Mohamad, who held the post until 1996. With her to provide further insights were Ms. Siti Zaharah Mat Akib who was the Director of Planning Division of DPE (until 2001) and Ms. Fatimah Hanum Mohd. Daud who was the Assistant Director of Registration (until 2004). They were directly involved in the preparation of the Private Higher Educational Institution Act (PHEI Act) 1996 and overseeing the success and smooth course of the Act. The interview focused on two major issues – the background and history of the development and progress of PHE in Malaysia and the challenges faced by the DPE in dealing with the enormous expansion of PHE in Malaysia.

The PHEI Act 1996 was initiated to cater for the fast and vast expansion of the PHE in Malaysia in the mid-1990s. The Act makes provision for the establishment of private universities, university colleges, branch campuses of foreign universities as well as the upgrading of existing colleges to universities. This is in line with the goal to liberalise higher



education in Malaysia so that the increasing demand for tertiary education and highly educated and skilled human resource can be met. In order to promote unity and understanding among the multiethnic society, new subjects such as Islamic Religious Education, Moral Education and Malaysian Studies are made compulsory in all PHEIs.

According to Arpah, prior to the PHEI Act, the Education Act 1961 was used for all levels of education, including higher education institutions. There were no specific acts or rules that focused on the development of PHEIs and private universities in Malaysia. From 1996, a private university could only be established when it received an invitation from the Minister of Education after meeting all the requirements stipulated in the PHEI Act.

PHEIs were closely monitored by the DPE which was established in October 1995. Its main duties included reviewing proposals submitted by potential private institutions and matching them against the requirements set in accordance to the PHEI Act 1996 which were then submitted

to the Ministry of Education for approval. The requirements for the establishment of PHEIs include building structure and safety, quality of lecturers, quality of academic programmes and financial strength. DPE also must ensure that all PHEIs undergo an annual registration process. Apart from that, it must attend to and investigate the complaints received from the public regarding mismanagement or wrongdoings by the PHEIs. The PHEI Act allows the DPE to close down any private education institution that does not comply with the rules, regulations and requirements that are stipulated. A PHEI, explained Arpah, “can be closed down and there are cases where PHEIs have been closed down for not complying with the rules and regulations subjected to them in their approval of establishment.” Before the PHEI Act, a big portion of the DPE’s work was focused on ensuring that all the twinning programmes in PHEIs ran smoothly especially in the facets of teaching and learning. The establishment of the Ministry of Higher Education in 2004, brought a change in the history of PHEIs. From that date the DPE ceased to be the authority responsible for matters regarding PHEIs and the task was entrusted to the Ministry of Higher Education until the present day.

As with other organisations, the DPE was not without challenges. The recession that began in the late 1990s, according to Arpah and her former colleagues, led to the increased demand for local PHEIs as students could no longer afford studies abroad. In line with the government policy to make Malaysia a centre of educational excellence, foreign students were given easy access and passage to continue their tertiary studies in Malaysia. More and more foreign students entered the country and registered with PHEIs. On the part of the DPE this overwhelming influx of foreign students was a huge challenge and most pressing due to shortage of personnel, facilities and finance to do the monitoring and enforcement activities of PHEIs as much as it was needed. However monitoring of PHEIs were then carried out in collaboration with the Police and Immigration Department since the DPE did not have power to prosecute PHEIs.

A further challenge was the “freedom” enjoyed and experienced by the students in PHEIs. Such freedom, they note, was unprecedented and may lead to many social problems that are beginning to be seen today. “This must be addressed before it is too late.” Nevertheless, on the positive side, the freedom also allows for more thinking, development of the students’ minds and creativity. Hence, a balance between the two must be found and nurtured.

Another challenge faced by the DPE was to safeguard the welfare of the students in PHEIs especially with regards to increase in tuition fees by some PHEIs which considered education more as a profit making opportunity rather than as a social obligation. Apart from that the DPE had to look into the interest and welfare of students in cases where PHEIs had to be closed down by their management due to financial problems.

A common scenario during their days at the DPE was the gap between PHEIs run by small companies and the

PHEIs run by giant corporates. “By overall comparison, the institutions managed by corporates tend to do well and much better than the ones managed by small companies, in every sense”, claims Arpah. For instance, the PHEIs managed by corporates had greater quality and were always concerned with the quality of their institutions and their good name. They also provided better facilities to the students and monitored the usage of these facilities well, and not many complaints were made against them. The small institutions could not always adhere to the requirements and regulations set. They could not sustain their operation due to lack of financial resources and inability to provide sufficient quality facilities as well as enough qualified teaching staff. Such a vacuum exists because the well established PHEIs were backed by organisations that did not focus solely on education but diversify their economic arm by involving in other economic sectors as well.

Despite the challenges faced, the establishment of the DPE, according to Arpah, succeeded in democratising and expanding HE in the sense that PHEIs were given bigger roles to play in the tertiary education in Malaysia, especially with the establishment of the four new private universities - Universiti Teknologi Petronas (UTP), Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN), Universiti Multimedia Malaysia (MMU) and International Medical University (IMU).

In contrast to the yesteryears and despite the various concerns, the PHEIs today have grown by leaps and bounds. The PHEIs, according to Arpah, have demonstrated their capabilities and potentials over the years. They have the knowledge, skills and technology in their respective fields of expertise. In fact, some such as MMU are more well-known than public institutions of higher learning (PHIL) in certain areas. Because of their financial strength, PHEIs are able to update their technology frequently, and with less bureaucratic procedures in updating their syllabus, they are able to make changes to their curriculum faster and thus cater to the current knowledge transfer.

The experience of these three officials imply the extent of changes that the PHEI scenario in the Malaysian context has undergone; from its very humble beginning in the 1980s to its current form, 25 years later. One striking development is the status achieved by many of the PHEIs – from private post-secondary institutions or colleges to international university colleges, with students and academics from different countries shaping the cores of the communities of these institutions. This has been a very positive development that has directed the Malaysian PHE into a new era of internationalisation of academia. Another is the government’s concern with the quality that is being offered by all the private education institutions throughout the country, which has transpired the establishment of the very important and influential Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) which replaced LAN in 2007. These two developments, apart from the many other determinants or factors, strongly indicate a promising future for the current PHEIs in Malaysia.